

Biblical Typos

The EHV NT has been available for more than six months now, and so far readers have spotted two to four typos.¹ We do not know how many more will be spotted, but one of the few things we can be sure of is that the EHV will have considerably fewer typos than the Hebrew text which was the foundation of our translation. The BHS printed Hebrew text is an attempt to reproduce the hand-written Leningrad Codex of the Hebrew Bible, but it is the practice of the editors not to correct “typos”² which they spot in the hand-written Leningrad Text but to preserve them in the printed edition and to label them with the tag *sic L* (which means “this is what the Leningrad Text reads”). There are well over 350 such footnotes in the BHS text and well over 200 of them are what we would call “typos” in the simplest sense of the term. In his *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* Emanuel Tov spends several pages discussing the many discrepancies between and within all of the hand-written and printed editions of the Hebrew Bible (see pages 3 and 4 for starters). He concludes that there are no completely identical versions of the biblical text unless they are photocopies or printed from the same electronic file. In fact, to a large degree, textual criticism is simply the practice of proofreading, the practice of finding and fixing typos.

Should this be a cause for concern? Not really—as a study of the following famous biblical typos will show. So that no one thinks we have an ax to grind with any particular Bible translation, we will limit the examples below largely to the venerable, venerated King James Version.

The Bible is generally read with more care than newspapers, which means that even relatively harmless blunders in Bible translations have been assured a place in typographical history.

We might as well start with the most notorious example of all—the so-called Wicked Bible or Adulterers Bible of 1631. In this printing of the King James, the sixth/seventh commandment in Exodus 20:14 came out, “Thou shalt commit adultery.” Authorities were outraged, and the offending printers were fined and imprisoned.

Surprisingly, this type of error involving the omission of the crucial word *not*, which makes such a huge difference in the meaning of a verse, is in fact one of the most common copying variants in the Bible. A variation between the Hebrew word לֹא (*loa*), which means *not*, and the Hebrew word לוֹ (*low*), which means *to him*, is another one of the most common textual variants in the Hebrew Bible.

Sometimes a passage can be understood as a true statement regardless of whether or not the word *not* is present. For example in Ezekiel 5:7 there are two readings: The reading, “You have acted according to the standards of justice followed by the nations around you,” is a strong condemnation of Israel. The other reading, “You have not [even] acted according to the standards of justice followed by the nations around you” is an even harsher condemnation. The same is true of very many of the לֹא לוֹ variants. Unless both could somehow be understood as correct, they would not have been recorded as variants.

“How can such an error happen?” you ask. “How can several proofreaders miss such a big error as a missing *not*?” It happens because our eyes and minds are trained to read what should be in a text, not what is there.

Most proficient readers of English can read the following selection quite quickly.

I cnduo't bvlleie taht I culod aulacly uesdtannrd waht I was rdnaieg. Unisg the icndeblire pweor of the hmuan mnid, aocdcnig to rseecrah at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it dseno't mtttaer in waht oderr the lterets in a wrod are, the olny irpoamtnt tihng is taht the frsit and lsat ltteer be in the rhgit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it whoutit a pboerlm. Tihis is bucease the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey ltteer by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe.

¹ The variant number *two to four* will be explained at the end of the article.

² In the term *typos* we are including hand-written or printed mistakes.

Actually there are several untruths and half-truths in this quotation, but it does demonstrate the basic point that interests us here: Because the mind of a reader does not focus on letters but on the meaning of words and whole groups of words, readers can without any great difficulty correctly read texts that have even a large number of typos. If you can read the text above, you can correctly read a biblical text with a couple of typos.

The amazing thing about the missing *not* in the Wicked Bible was not that the printers of the Wicked Bible got into trouble with the self-righteous royal authorities, but that it took a year for them to be caught and prosecuted. Purchasers of the Bible were apparently either buying the Bible and not reading it, or they were reading it and not noticing the error because they were autocorrecting it as all competent readers do. (One of the chief challenges for a proofreader is to turn off his or her built-in autocorrect app.)

The time lag of a year in the Wicked Bible case is not particularly surprising nor is it anywhere near a record for uncorrected errors. Once when editing an English translation of a German version of a Luther letter, both the translator and the editor ran across a sentence which absolutely required the presence of the word *not*, but in tracing the letter through all the printed editions back to the 1560s, there was no edition that included the necessary word *not*. Apparently these two were the first editors in 250 years to notice and to correct the missing *not*. (We later found out that the original Latin letter written by Luther was in a library in Latvia, and there at last was the missing *not*.) It is not unthinkable that our best Hebrew manuscript somewhere has a typo that originated in the pre-Christian era.

We could easily chalk up this notorious scandal of the missing *not* in the Adulterers Bible to proofreader incompetence or to readers with built-in autocorrect turned on, if it were not for another extremely wicked error in the Wicked Bible, an error so bad that it would seal the lips and close the eyes of the genteel English ladies who were reading the Bible. In Deuteronomy 5:24, the doubly-wicked Wicked Bible said that “the LORD our God hath shewed us his glory and his greatasse.” (It was supposed to be *greatnesse*.) The error of the missing *not* in the commandment could very likely have been caused by operator error, but this second wicked reading reeks of sabotage, and it lends credibility to the rumor that the errors in the Wicked Bible were not mistakes but were the result of a wicked plot by a rival printer to ruin the publisher so that he would lose the license to print the King James Bible and the villainous rival printer could then get the license. Conspiracy theorists even name a likely suspect, a chap named Bonham Norton, who perhaps deserves the title “the first hacker.”

Besides the peril of hackers, modern producers of electronic Bibles face three other perils. Spell-checkers will sometimes change a fine word like *pericope* into *periscope*. Too close a pass of a finger near the touchpad can delete a word or even a line several pages away, without the operator even noticing it. A blip in the electronic data flow can introduce an error like the visual errors that regularly occur in your streaming programs.

Such a software/hardware error produced the glitch in the printed Owl Bible, a 1944 printing of the King James. “Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your owl husbands,” This error was not a typo but the result of a damaged metal printing plate. The right side of the “n” in the word “own” was chipped off. Then the base of the letter appears bent to the left slightly. This results in the lower case letter “n” looking exactly like a capital “L.” Since both the “o” and “w” appear the same in lower case and capital letters, the word ends up looking exactly like “OWL.”

The EHV may have had one or two such a software-induced errors. In the first printing, in Matthew 5:16, the verse number is not superscripted as it should be but is regular size. The numeral is correctly superscripted in all the galleys and printouts, so this blip may be the result of a software error in the printing process. If your copy of EHV has this blip, you have a genuine first printing. Save it and pass it

on to your grandchildren, though they may not be able to sell it for the high five-figure payout that you can collect by selling a really wicked Bible.³

A few more examples illustrate the point:

In a 1653 printing of the King James Bible, 1 Corinthians 6:9 reads: “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall inherit the kingdom of God?” Those pesky missing negatives are not that rare.

In a 1763 printing, Psalm 14:1 says: “The fool hath said in his heart there is a God.”

In a 1716 printing of the King James Version, Jeremiah 31:34 says “sin on more” instead of “sin no more.” This has recently been dubbed the Partyers Bible.

A glaring mistake can be found in an 1807 printing. Hebrews 9:14 declares, “How much more shall the blood of Christ ...purge your conscience from good works to serve the living God.” Apparently the error was not quite glaring enough.

In a 1682 printing, Deuteronomy 24:3 was supposed to read, “If the latter husband hate her.” The unfortunate dropping of a single letter led to this edition being dubbed the Cannibal’s Bible. It apparently sold well in the South Pacific.

In the second edition of the Geneva Bible of 1562, Matthew 5:9 says “Blessed are the placemakers,” rather than “peacemakers.” I suppose the 21st century edition would be “blessed are the pacemakers.” In the same edition, the chapter heading for Luke 21 says “Christ condemneth the poor widow,” rather than “Christ commendeth the poor widow.”

Bible typos don’t have to be old. In the 1966 first edition of the Jerusalem Bible, Psalm 122:6 read, “Pay for peace” instead of “Pray for peace.” In the 1970 first edition of the King James II, John 1:5 reads “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness overcomes it.” This was corrected to “the darkness does not overcome it” in the second edition, in the following year after the error was brought to the attention of the publishers. That pesky missing *not* again!

The presence or absence of a comma is probably more an editorial glitch than a typo. In some editions of the King James version, Luke 23:32 says that there were also two other malefactors crucified with Jesus. The lack of an “s” at the end of “other” and the lack of a comma after “others” makes Jesus a malefactor. The text was supposed to read: “And there were also two others, malefactors...”

In a 1612 printing of the King James Bible, Psalm 119:161 says, “Printers have persecuted me without a cause.” The text itself seems to be crying out here.

Typos can be costly. A missing hyphen in the programing of a Venus probe caused the rocket to blow up, costing the space program millions of dollars. We have all read stories about a missing or misplaced decimal point causing big problems at the bank. In 2007, a US car dealership came up with a brilliant plan to boost sluggish sales. They sent out 50,000 scratch cards, one of which would reveal a \$1,000 cash prize. But the marketing firm messed up the printing, so that ALL the cards were grand-prize winners. Unable to honor the debt, the dealership offered a \$5 Walmart gift voucher to every “winner.” At least it was not a Starbucks card.

But mostly typos are just an embarrassment to the publishers and a delight to the whistle blowers.

A recipe in an Australian publication advised seasoning the pasta with “salt and freshly ground black people.” We are confident no one followed this misguided recommendation.

³ Incidentally, most of the information in this article comes from the websites of Bible-collecting societies. They are always on the lookout for good (or preferably really bad) typos which can earn big money. The other main sources are articles in British papers like the Guardian and Mirror. Fascination with Bible typos seems to be a British thing. Google *Bible typos* and you will get lots of examples.

A newspaper reported that after a storm a man was seriously injured by contact with a high-voltage wife.

There is an old editorial rule that any article containing the word *public* must be read at least four times to check for a missing letter. (This typo is known as the proofreader's worst nightmare.)

A travel company sued the newspaper when their ad for exotic vacations became an ad for erotic vacations. It seems that they would have been hard-pressed to prove the ad hurt their business.

Was the prize winner rewarded with a plaque or a plague? Few readers would have any trouble correcting such mistakes, but editors are still eager to avoid them, more to avoid embarrassment than to prevent any significant damage. It is the same with Bible typos, even with those that are embarrassing. Besides the jailing of the unlucky printer of the Wicked Bible very few biblical typos have ever done any serious harm. Nevertheless, it is highly desirable to avoid them to the degree it is possible for humans to do so. Electronic publishing should make it easier to gradually winnow out errors, but probably never completely because every opening of an electronic file creates the possibility of a new error being introduced by a wayward touch. The perfection of Scripture remains in God's act of giving it, not in our act of transmitting it. But the minor flaws of transmission do not prevent the truth reaching the reader. Just as the rough or squeaky voice of the preacher does not remove the power of the gospel, flaws in the printing and writing of the text does not dim the message and meaning of the text.

It is important to take note of this, because, besides Bible collectors and British journalists, the biggest fans of biblical typos are unbelieving critics of the Bible, who claim that these typos take away from the inerrancy of the Bible. The grand total of all of the variants in the biblical texts do not bring into question any teaching of the Bible, much less the minor typos that characterize human writing.

What about the EHV?

There were two blips that appear to be computer glitches:

Besides the superscript number glitch in Matthew 5:16 mentioned above, 2 Peter 3:17 has a superscript "5" before "through" – It seems that this is a computer-induced mistake that was not in our final manuscript, so it is like the Matthew 5:16 blip.

The following three typos have been reported in the first printing of the EHV New Testament.

Luke 19:27 – Insert "of" before "me"

Ephesians 4:32 – "other" should be "another" as follows... ³²Instead, be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven us.

1 Thessalonians 2:7 the footnote needs an "s" on "infants" to agree with the plural *children* in the main text,

⁷ Some witnesses to the text read *infants*. This variant would change the translation to: *we could have been a burden as Christ's apostles, but we were infants among you. Like a nursing mother taking care of her own children, ⁸we yearned . . .*

It is not always agreed among proofreaders and readers what is a typo.

Acts 10:25 – We added a "p" to "worshipped" so it is now "worshipped," Many people regard "worshipped" as the correct American spelling, but computer studies show that "worshipped" is the standard spelling on both sides of the Atlantic, and this is the standard spelling elsewhere in the EHV.

Psalms has three additional fixes

Psalms 13:6: insert the verse #6 as follows:

⁵But I trust in your mercy.
My heart rejoices in your salvation.
⁶I will sing to the LORD
because he has accomplished his purpose for me.

Psalm 38:7 – A period is missing at the end of the first sentence in the verse (“Even my back burns with pain”). Perhaps the footnote masked the absence of the period.

Psalm 113:1 – should have a small “p” on “praise” at the beginning of the third line.

¹Praise the LORD.
Praise, you servants of the LORD,
praise the name of the LORD.

But is this correction really correct? See the next example.

What is a typo?

Psalm 29:1 gives another example that demonstrates that some situations do not fit neatly into pigeon holes:

The EHV text now reads:

¹Ascribe to the LORD, you sons of God,
Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name.

This is a triple parallelism that is one thought-unit of the poem, and the punctuation and capitalization reflect that. Each of the three lines is a discreet independent musical unit of the song that together form one larger unit. Here, as often in Hebrew poetry, one of the members of a poetic unit is grammatically incomplete. In other words the grammar and the poetry do not neatly match. Going purely by English grammar the second line should begin with a small *a* (though even in English there is another competing rule that poetic lines can begin with caps independent of the grammar). From the poetic and musical perspective it would look odd to have the first and third lines with capital *A* but not the second line. This is what we call “a case of casuistry.” There are two or more rules that apply to the case, and it is not possible to follow all of them. In grammar as in practical theology this is not an uncommon occurrence, and the writer has to decide which rule to follow.

So which capitalization do you like best? The version above or this version:

¹Ascribe to the LORD, you sons of God,
ascibe to the LORD glory and strength.
²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name.

Both are correct, but they give priority to different rules.